

The Root of Evil

By THOMAS DIXON

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CHAPTER X.

At the King's Command.

BIVENS' plan would have gone through without a hitch but for one thing. He had overlooked the fact that the king of Mammon in America has a king and that the present ruler is very much alive. A man of few words, of iron will, of fiery temper, of keen intellect, proud, ambitious, resourceful, bold, successful, a giant in physique and a giant in personality.

It happens that his majesty is an old time Wall street banker, with inherited traditions about banks and the way their funds should be handled. He had long held a pet aversion. The Van Dam Trust company had become an offense to his nostrils. It had built a huge palace far up town and its president had attempted to set up a court of his own. He had gathered about him a following, among them an ex-president of the United States. Gold had poured into the treasury of the great marble palace in a constant stream until its deposits had reached the unprecedented sum of \$50,000,000, a sum greater than the royal bank itself could boast.

When the king heard the first rumor of the fact that the Van Dam Trust was backing the schemes of the Allied Bankers in their sensational raid on the market his big nostrils suddenly dilated.

At last he had them just where he wanted them. He signed the death warrant of the bank and handed it to his executive without a word of comment. And then a most curious thing happened. The king summoned to his presence a little, dark, swarthy man.

When Bivens received this order to appear at court he was dumfounded. He had long worshiped and feared the king with due reverence and always spoke his name with awe. To be actually called into his august presence in such a crisis was an undreamed-of honor. He hastened into the royal presence with beating heart. The sovereign glanced up with quick energy.

"Mr. Bivens, I believe?"

The little man bowed low.

"I hear that you are about to aid the Van Dam Trust with four millions in cash?"

Bivens smiled with pride.

"My secretary will deliver the money to the bank within an hour."

The king suddenly wheeled in his big armchair, raised his eyebrows and fixed the little man with a stare that froze the blood in his veins. When he spoke at length his tones were smooth as velvet.

"If I may give you a suggestion, Mr. Bivens, I would venture to say that the Van Dam Trust company is beyond aid. The larger interests of the nation require the elimination of this institution and its associates."

"I have heard good reports of you, and I wish to save you from the disaster about to befall the gentlemen who have been conducting the present campaign in Wall street. If your secretary will report to me at once with the four millions you have set aside for the Van Dam company I shall be pleased to place your name on my executive council in the big movement we begin today. The other gentlemen whom I have thus honored are now waiting for me in the adjoining room. They represent a banking power that is resistless at the present moment."

"When the Van Dam Trust closes its doors today a temporary panic will follow. We will give the gentlemen who started this excitement a taste of their own medicine, render a service to the nation and incidentally, of course, earn an honest dollar or two for ourselves. I trust I have your hearty support in this program?"

Bivens again bowed low.

"My hearty support and my profoundest gratitude."

"I'll expect your secretary with your check for four millions within thirty minutes."

The king waved a friendly gesture of dismissal, and the little dark figure tremblingly withdrew. He had been ordered to stab his associates.

Without a moment's hesitation he gave the cruel orders that sent them hurrying over the precipice.

When the president of the Van Dam Trust company failed to receive the promised millions from Bivens he called his telephone and, receiving no answer, sprang into his automobile and dashed downtown to the little main office.

When the clerk at the door informed him that Mr. Bivens could not be seen by any one, he drove back to the palatial house of his bank, smiled sadly at the mob in front of its huge pillars, ordered its bronze doors closed, walked around the corner to his home, locked himself in his room and blew his brains out.

For a week the panic held the financial world in the grip of death. A dozen banks had closed their doors and a

score of men who had long boasted their courage among men had died the death of cowards when put to the test.

One of the most curious results of the panic was the revulsion of popular feeling against the daring and honest young officer of the law who had rendered the greatest service to the people wrought by any public servant in a generation. He was hailed as the arch traitor of the people, the man who had used his high office to produce a panic and carve a fortune out of the ruin of millions whose deposits were tied up in banks that might never again open their doors.

Stuart, stung to desperation by their infamous charges, attempted at first to repel them. He stopped at last in disgust and maintained afterward a dignified silence.

From the first day of the run Bivens had laughed in the face of the crowd that besieged the door of his big Broadway bank. He stood on top of the granite steps and shouted in their faces:

"Come on, you dirty cowards! I've got your money inside waiting for you, every dollar of it—100 cents on the dollar!"

The crowd made no reply. They merely moved up in line in stolid silence a little closer to the door. Each day this line had grown longer. Bivens was not worrying. The king had spoken. The folly of these people in their insane efforts to wreck Bivens' bank was making impossible a return to normal business.

Stuart determined to face this crowd and have it out with them. He believed that a bold appeal to their reason would silence his critics and allay their insane fears. He told Bivens of his purpose over the telephone, and the financier protested vigorously.

"Don't do it, Jim, I beg of you," he pleaded. "It will be a waste of breath. Besides, you risk your life."

"I'll be there when the bank opens at 10 o'clock tomorrow morning," was the firm answer.

When Stuart appeared the next morning a roar of rage swept the crowd. Howls, curses, catcalls, hisses, hoots and yells were hurled into his face. It was a new experience in Stuart's life. He flushed red, stood for a moment surveying the mob with growing anger and lifted his hand for silence.

The answer was a storm of hisses. Apparently he hadn't a friend in all the awaying mass of howling maniacs. He drew his heavy brows down over his eyes and the square jaws ground together with sullen determination.

With a sudden impulse he threw his right hand high above his head and his voice boomed over the crowd in a peal of command. The effect was electrical. A palatial hush followed.

"Gentlemen!"

He paused and his next words were spoken in intense silence.

"My answer to the extraordinary greeting you have given me this morning is simple. I am not working for your approval. I work for my own approval, because I must in obedience to the call within me. Long ago in my life I gave up ambition and ceased to ask anything for myself. You cannot destroy my career because I cherish none. The scene you are enacting here this morning is a disgrace to humanity. You have surrendered to the unmeaning fear that drives a herd of swine over a precipice. You have, by an act of will, joined in a movement to paralyze

the motive power of the world—faith! There is but one thing that runs this earth of ours for a single day—faith in one another."

"You are scrambling here for a few dollars in this bank. What can you do with it when you draw it out? There is not enough cash in the world to transact a single day's business. Business is run on credit—faith. The business of a bank is to keep money moving and make it do the world's work. You are attempting to stop the work by the destruction of its faith."

Suddenly a man who had quietly pushed his way through the crowd sprang on the step before the speaker and thrust a revolver into his face.

A cry of horror swept the crowd, as Stuart paused, turned pale and looked steadily down the flashing barrel into the madman's eyes.

"Who started this work of destruction?" the man cried. "You—you do!"

He hurled him down the steps.

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"I'm sure he will consider your offer now."

Bivens looked at her a moment curiously and she turned her eyes away.

"Why do you think he has changed his attitude toward me?"

"From something he said. That mob has written a question mark before his life."

CHAPTER XI.

The Lamp of Aladdin.

THE clouds of the panic slowly lifted and the sun began to shine. A fearless officer of the law had struck a blow for justice that marked the beginning of a new era of national life. Slowly but surely the prices of stocks began to mount.

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you hear me? And I've been commanded by God Almighty to end this trouble by ending you!"

As Stuart held the glittering eyes leveled at him across the blue black barrel he could see the man's nervous and uncertain finger twitching at the trigger. With a sudden panther like spring he leaped across the five feet which separated him from the man who held the revolver. His left hand gripped the weapon and threw it into the air as it was fired, while his right hand closed on the throat of his assailant. With his knee against the man's breast he hurled him down the steps, wrenching the revolver from his hand and with a single blow knocked him into insensibility.

The spell was broken. The mob that hated him saw their chance. A yell of rage swept them, and a dozen men sprang toward him with curses. For a moment he held his own, when suddenly a well directed blow from behind knocked him down. In blind fury he felt the smash of blows on his face and head. A stream of blood was trickling down his forehead and its salty taste penetrated his mouth.

A sudden crash from space seemed to send the crowd into a mass of flaming splinters and the light faded. He heard the soft rustle of silks and felt the pressure of a woman's lips on his. Surely he must be dead, was the first thought that flashed through his mind. And then from somewhere far away in space came Nan's voice low and tense:

"Come back, Jim, dear, I've something to tell you. You can't die, you shall not die until I've told you."

He opened his eyes and found Nan bending over him. His hand rested on her soft arm, and his head lay pillowed on her breast.

"Why, Nan, it's you! What's happened? What on earth are you doing here?"

He looked about the room and saw that he was in the inner office of the president of the bank, alone with Bivens' wife. He was lying on the big leather couch.

"I heard that you were going to speak this morning. I wanted to hear you and came. I arrived just as you began and managed to get into the bank. I saw that man try to kill you, Jim, and that crowd of wild beasts trampling you to death. Two detectives pulled you out and dragged you into the bank."

A doctor entered and quickly dressed Stuart's wounds, and turned to Nan.

"He'll be all right in a week or so, Mrs. Bivens, provided he doesn't insist on breaking the run on another bank by the spell of his eloquence. I hope you can persuade him not to try that again."

"I think I'm fully persuaded, doctor," Stuart answered grimly. "I've seen a great light today."

When the doctor had gone and Nan was left alone with Stuart an embarrassed silence fell between them.

She was quietly wondering if he were fully unconscious when she was sobbing and saying some very foolish things. Above all, she was wondering whether he knew that she had kissed him.

When her car stopped at South Washington square and Stuart insisted on scrambling out alone, she held his hand tight a moment and spoke with trembling earnestness:

"You will see me now, Jim, and be friends?"

He answered promptly.

"Yes, Nan, I will. The world is never going to be quite the same place for me after today. There was one moment this morning in which I think I lived a thousand years."

A hot flush stole over the woman's beautiful face as she looked steadily into his eyes and quietly asked:

"What moment was that?"

"The moment I looked down that gun barrel, saw the stupid hate in that fool's eyes and felt the throbbing of the insane desire to kill in the people behind him, the people for whom I've been giving my life a joyous sacrifice."

Nan smiled a sigh of relief.

"Oh, I see. Well, you've made me very happy with your promise. I know you will keep your word."

He pressed her hand firmly.

"You are more beautiful than ever, Nan. Yes, I'll keep my word. Goodbye until I call."

And the woman smiled in triumph.

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"By George!" he exclaimed, his black eyes sparkling. "It may be possible."

"You'll try?" Nan asked eagerly.

"I'll not try—I'll do it."

"I've an enemy somewhere among the fallen," Bivens went on musingly, "who is dying hard. In spite of the fact that I have unlimited resources, this man is constantly circulating reports about the soundness of my finances. He uses the telephone principally and he has started two runs on my bank within the past month. Another is pending. I'm going to ask Jim to preside over an investigation of my resources in the presence of a dozen newspaper reporters."

Nan stooped and kissed him.

When Stuart reached Bivens' new offices in Wall street he was amazed at their size and magnificence. The first impression was one of dazzling splendor. The huge reception hall was trimmed from floor to dome in onyx and gold.

Stuart nodded to a group of reporters waiting for the chance of a word with the great man. "Looks like a full house, doesn't it?" he said.

"They've been here for hours," said a reporter. "There are a senator, three members of the house of representatives, an ambassador, the governor of a Chinese province, a Japanese prince and a dozen big politicians from as many states, to say nothing of the small fry."

"Well, I have an appointment with Mr. Bivens at this hour."

"Really?" the reporter gasped. "Then for heaven's sake give me a chance at five minutes before the other fellows. Remember now, I saw you first!"

He was still pleading when Stuart smilingly drew away and followed one of Bivens' secretaries.

Bivens came forward to greet him with outstretched hands.

"I needn't say I am glad to see you, Jim. How do you like my new quarters?"

"Absolutely stunning. I had no idea you cultivated such ceremonial splendor in your business."

"Yes, I like it," the financier admitted thoughtfully. "I don't mind confessing to you on the spot that it was Nan's idea at first, but I took to it like a duck to water."

In spite of Stuart's contempt for the mere possession of money, in spite of his traditional contempt for Bivens' antecedents, character and business methods, he found himself unconsciously

paying homage to the power the little, dark, swarthy figure today incarnated. Bivens had become more difficult of approach and carried himself with quiet, conscious pride.

Stuart was scarcely prepared for the hearty, old fashioned cordial way in which he went about the business for which he had asked him to come.

"Now, Jim, this is your day; those fellows out there in the reception hall can wait. You and I must have the thing out—man to man, heart to heart. You can talk plainly and I'll answer squarely."

"I've got a proposition to make to you, so big you've got to hear it, so big you can't get away from it, because you're not a fool. You're a man of genius. There is no height to which you cannot climb when once your feet are on the ladder. And I'm going to put them there."

The assurance in Bivens' voice and the contagious enthusiasm with which he spoke impressed Stuart.

Bivens was quick to recognize it and strike at once.

"Before I present my plans I want to show you that I can make good my word. I have caused these reporters to be sent here today for the purpose of giving the widest publicity to the facts about my fortune. Another run has been planned tomorrow on one of my banks. I have placed my money and securities in the next room, so arranged that you can verify my statements, and at the proper moment I shall ask these reporters into the place and let them see with their own eyes. There can be no more rumors in Wall street about my financial status. Come in here."

Bivens led the way into the room beyond, which was the meeting place of the directors of his many corporations.

Stuart had scarcely passed the door when he stopped, struck dumb with amazement. In the center of the great office was a sight that held him spell-

bound. An immense vermilion wood table, six feet wide and fifty feet in length filled the center. On it the wizard had placed his fortune of ninety millions of dollars. Twenty millions were in gold, its heavy weight sustained by extra stanchions. The coin, apparently all new from the national mint, was carefully arranged around the edges of the table in a solid bulwark two feet high.

Behind this gleaming yellow pile of gold he had placed his stocks and bonds—each pile showing on its top layer the rich green, gold or purple colors of its issue, each pile marked with a tag which showed its total amount. The effect was stunning.

Bivens approached the table softly and reverently, as a priest approaches the high altar, and touched the gold with the tips of his slender little fingers.

"I've just begun—"

"You've just begun?" Stuart interrupted laughingly.

"Yes, you'll understand what I mean before I've finished the day's work."

"But why?" the young lawyer asked passionately. "Such a purpose seems to me in view of this stunning revelation the sheerest insanity. Life, the one priceless thing we possess, is too short. I can see you shoveling coal through all eternity!"

"But I happen to be going to the other place," Bivens broke in good naturedly.

Stuart looked at the pile of gold a moment and then at Bivens and said slowly:

"Well, if you do get there, Cal, there's one thing certain, the angels will all have to sleep with their pocket-books under their pillows."

Bivens' eyes sparkled and a smile played about the hard lines of his mouth. In spite of its doubtful nature he enjoyed the tribute to his financial genius beneath the banter of his friend's joke. With a gesture of conscious dignity he turned to the table and quietly said:

"You will find on this table exactly \$90,000,000. Within an hour you can examine each division of coin, stocks and bonds and bear witness to the truth of my assertions. I'm going to close that door and leave you here for an hour."

"Alone with all that?"

"Oh, there's only one way out," Bivens laughed—"through my little reception room, and I'll be there. I'll meet some of the gentlemen who are waiting. When you are satisfied of the accuracy of my account, just tap on my door and I'll join you immediately. Do the inspection carefully. It's of grave importance. I shall call on you as a witness by and before that group of newspaper men."

When Stuart had satisfied himself of the accuracy of the count, he stood gazing at the queer looking piles of yellow metal and richly tinted paper, stunned by the attempt to realize the enormous power over men which it represented. When the huge pile should thrill with life at the touch of the deft fingers of the master who could grasp its stunning force in human affairs, who could tell its possibilities?

The age of materialism had dawned, and the new age knew but one god, whose temple was the market place. A wave of bitterness swept his spirit, and for the first time he questioned for the briefest moment whether he had missed the way in life. Only for a moment, and then the feeling passed, and in its place slowly rose a sense of angry resentment against Bivens and all his tribe. When the little swarthy figure suddenly appeared in the doorway his soul was in arms for the struggle he knew coming.

"Well, you found I've not made a mistake?"

"No. To put it mildly, you will not be forced to apply to the charity bureau for any outside help this year."

"You have counted \$90,000,000 there. As I told you awhile ago, I've just begun. I've schemes on foot that circle the globe. I've made up my mind to have you with me. We won't discuss terms now—that's a mere detail—the thing is for us to get at the differences between us. Now say the meanest and hardest things you can think. I understand."

"My opinion, Cal, of your business methods are known to every one. They say that the warriors of the Dakota Indians used to eat the heart of a fallen foe to increase their courage. Your business methods haven't made much progress beyond this stage, so far as I can see."

Bivens stroked his silken beard with a nervous, puzzled movement and said:

"The passion for money, money for its own sake, right or wrong, is the motive power of the modern world. That's why I laugh at my critics and sneer at threats. I am secure because I've built my career on the biggest fact of the century."

"But," Stuart broke in, "you don't live. You are engaged in an endless fight, desperate, cruel, mercenary—for what?"

"The game, man, the game!"

"Game? What game? To crush and kill for the mere sake of doing it, as a sheep killing dog strangles fifty lambs in a night for the fun of hearing them bleat?"

"But, Jim," the little financier protested, "I don't make men as they are, nor did I make conditions."

"You are a wrecker and not a builder."

"But is that true?" Bivens interrupted eagerly. "I'm organizing the industries of the world. I have furthered the progress of humanity."

"Yes, in a way you have. And if the price of goods continues to rise for another ten years as it has during the past ten under your organizing the human race will be compelled to make

still further progress. They will have to move to another planet. Nobody but a millionaire can live on this one. A day of reckoning is bound to come. But a millionaire dies every day. Nobody knows. Nobody cares. Is such a life at its best worth living? And yours is never at its best. You can't eat much. You don't sleep well and you can't live beyond fifty-five."

"Don't talk nonsense, Jim; I'll live as long as you."

"And yet you turn pale when I speak of death?"

Bivens suddenly drew his watch and spoke with quick, nervous energy:

"I must call those reporters and get rid of them as soon as possible."

He gave the order, and in a few moments waited back into the room followed by the newspaper men, a half dozen young fellows with clean cut, eager faces. Not one of them showed a pencil or a note book, but not a feature of the startling exhibition escaped their intelligence. Every eye flashed with piercing light, every nerve quivered with sensitive impressions.

They looked at Bivens with peculiar